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POL S 384

Reading Response 1: Week 5

Overall content of the readings:

The most important reading (to me) this week was Keohane's "Regime Complex for Climate Change," because it provided a truly comprehensive overview and argument for using a more diverse regime framework in fighting environmental degradation. A regime complex is the most ideal balance, given the circumstances, between a broken assortment of institutions that has no issue connection and a strict, hierarchical, integrated but singular regime. The linkages among environmental problems, along with the large range of interest and just general uncertainty from rapidly changing consensuses make the best argument for a healthy middle point. Effective regimes hope to maximize global cooperation while minimizing areas for conflict after all, and respecting the diversity of priorities across states by accommodating them will lead to high outcomes and better learning. The instrumental aspect is key in that learning, as covered in lectures: the argument is that regime complexes simply provide a stronger set of tools to be handling climate change. There is greater flexibility across issues and adaptability over time. It seems in this, problem diversity luckily happens alongside solution diversity. But as the authors argue, they are not the ultimate perfect solution. There is also room for chaos and gridlock there. Still, it is simply that "a single institutional response is exceptionally difficult to organize and sustain," meaning regime complexes shine in their place (Keohane 13). Moreover, the authors lay out six dimensions of assessing efficacy: coherence (with compatible and reinforcing regime components that reduce gridlock), accountability, determinacy/coordination, sustainability/long-standing systems, epistemic quality, and fairness overall. Finally, some policy implications are proposed that implement regime complexes, including international emission trading, innovation around land use offsets, and implementing border tax adjustments (BTA) correctly.

Thinking about IEAs (International Environmental Agreements) is also highly important, and Mitchell handled it in a thoughtful, thorough manner. First by defining thoughtfully: international environmental agreements are legally binding, between at least two states, and aim to prevent or manage human-driven impacts on the environment. The author went to many lengths in defining his terminology, what is included and what is omitted (such as soft law). Everything from the meaning of "environmental" to what falls under these agreements and even describing "international." It is a reminder that language is a conscious choice that in practice defines much of the environmental politics stage and frameworks. Mitchell continues this effort in talking about multilateral agreements and their connections, and bilateral agreements. Interestingly, governments often simply replace bilaterals rather than modify them; multilateral agreements function the opposite way. Finally, the author describes international negotiations on

environmental consensuses, and how mere public agreement is not sufficient to lead to meaningful action. For instance, policy shifts occur strongly after notable climate-related tragedies, but not much otherwise.

This ties back to an important question in the introduction, “Why have countries quickly negotiated significant agreements to address some environmental problems while they have made few attempts, or have failed, to address others?” (Mitchell 430). Mitchell finally answers: it depends on their preferences, as mentioned, which stem from a variety of domestic structures, politics, and policy styles. The effectiveness of an IEA lies in responding to the specific problem addressed and socioeconomic, political, and other exigent circumstances of the states affected. The states that are committed will act anyway, but the onus is on convincing those who drag their feet to stop free-riding. Luckily, the very act of holding a meeting can often push things along because the idea of cooperation is a strong motivator. Moreover, climate change is unfortunately unique where positive effects may only be felt in lessening the negative, and they can sometimes only be compared to the alternative of no action rather than celebrated as an improvement from the past. Additionally, as covered in lecture 2 this week, a myriad of external factors (like mere incapacity) can lead to behavioral change that are not related to the treaty, even if it could seem that way. So another good posit by Mitchell was in reframing the question of the regime’s impact on behavior as how it varies across states, which can account for these factors and differences (Mitchel 449). Summarily, defining the problem and how aggressively it is handled will influence its effects by filtering it through potential blockers of costs and resistance.

Moreover, the reader better understands the intersectionality inherent in discussions surrounding global environmental politics through The Conversation’s article, “Paris climate summit: why more women need seats at the table.” This typically refers to the battle between science and realpolitik versus philosophy or political ideology, but now viewpoints better factor in gender as well. And for good reason: the woman’s perspective is ofte32n neglected, making up just 15 percent of all interviews on the climate, when female contributions are proven to raise the intelligence of a given group (Ivanova 2015). The author demonstrates this best through 15 brief biographies of female environmental advocacy superstars, such as the vice president of the World Bank, the French special representative for COP 21, and even the former president of Ireland who now runs a center for climate justice. All people deserve to have their stories heard, especially on our changing planet, as the adverse effects are inherently felt unevenly.

Finally, we think about fossil fuels in reading about the Belém COP 30, what was included and the implications for what was not. For instance, there was disappointingly no “explicit reference to phasing out fossil fuels.” (de Carvalho 2026). Some would question what is the point in allocating $1.3 trillion annually for climate action when the big-ticket issue is not being handled. This is while our planet can only be saved from catastrophic temperatures and massive Amazon/coral reef devastation, even more than what is currently occurring, by completely cutting out fossil fuels in the next 15 to 20 years at absolute most. However, there is hope: this large sum will help countries implement their other contributions and finally work to

tackle climate disinformation. There are two roadmaps for the future, to halt deforestation and to cut down on fossil fuels. Therefore the goal is to cooperate and continue negotiations, even while we as a planet are in "turbulent geopolitical waters" according to UN climate chief Simon Stiell. But I want to end this summary on a hopeful note, because investments in renewable energy double the pace of fossil fuels, and that proves there is room for improvement.

How do these readings advance our understanding of environmental politics?

There is one underlying theme here: the diversity of frameworks and identities/viewpoints present (and absent) in environmental politics, which affect the agreement effectiveness and outcomes. Mitchell and Keohane are looking at the former by analyzing what is the best approach and how it presents itself, and importantly, why. Regime complexes, while not the Jesus of institutions, are a good first step that promote global cooperation through accepting diversity of opinion and circumstance. They allow Global South and North countries to not butt heads but work together, understanding each other's perspectives. Moreover, unfortunately the agreements that *come from* these complexes as Mitchell describes are challenging to feel happy about due to the inherently slow and winding progress in the environmental field. But there are differences based on whether the agreements are bilateral or more international. I would even wager that the international agreements combined with regime complex structure are more suitable for effectiveness, by allowing for the most cooperation but also leniency, ensuring that all perspectives are heard and valued. Bilateral agreements can be useful for issues constrained to a small amount of parties, but if the worldwide environmental stage truly wants to accommodate all global circumstances, they must implement more opportunities for collaboration. That collaboration includes different underrepresented groups, including women and preferably people from the affected areas, such as those living in the Amazon or near coral reef areas. These readings are all arguing, in more or less explicit manners, through review of notable impacts or of various possible methods, that all people deserve to publicly discuss how the climate changing impacts them, through treaties and conferences and other manners of multinational cooperation.

In terms of contributing to understanding, these readings emphasize the need as I mention above for diverse perspectives and methods of tackling the most important problem on our planet: saving it from ourselves. Keohane helpfully brings in numerous examples to characterize his point on the need for complexes. For instance, the Kyoto Protocol is generally considered a failure, especially in the Clean Development Mechanism which was hoping to encourage low-emission investment in developing countries. However, it was poorly administrated and its universality ended up excluding offsets in many areas and favoring ones that are less cost-effective (Keohane 15). This advances our understanding because it is always important to reassess any action to ensure it is still helping the end goal, and not hurting it. At best, the Kyoto Protocol did not help and at worst it made things worse, even if it was always well-intentioned and a sign of global cooperation.

Additionally, the Conversation article brings in more needed commentary on in the exact ways where women are already helping the world combat environmental damage, which shows why their voice deserves to be heard more publicly and frequently. Some may think that women being present or not makes no difference, because science does not see gender. However, referencing over a dozen examples of strong women that are making real change in environmental politics is clear evidence of why we need them. These experienced career environmentalists as well as everyday people, especially those in developing countries, who often sadly face traditional gender roles today. This puts them in a unique experience of being able to explain the environmental change's effects on their children's education, or food prices and quality. Our understanding now factors in an additional lens: not only are socioeconomic diversities crucial to helping fix environmental damage, but so are diversities in gender.

Moreover I think the UN article and Mitchell's IEAs balance each other well on the need for quick progress, and why it is not so simple politically. I mean, we are talking about permanent damage in just a few decades with unknown catastrophic effects. The idea of the collapse of the Amazon rainforest is existential and depressing, and current agreements do not even capture the main issue of fossil fuels. But Mitchell adds important insight, even if it does not ease our worries, that often times the progress we are making does not seem to do anything because it is innately slow. If we are on the figurative number line, we are going forward, it's just that we are still on the negative axis. Understanding the current state of events and the frameworks that lead to it is critical to being able to continue the momentum of global cooperation, and doing so effectively and equitably.

What do we not know about this topic and why is it important?

For one, Keohane would agree with me that it's left unclear whether regime complexes or strong, comprehensive regimes are the better model. While it seems clear that greater breadth of issues covered could lead to more satisfied parties, there is still room for gridlock, and I personally worry that regime complexes may spread institution too thin. It may be better to tackle one issue at a time, starting with fossil fuels, than create regimes that try to solve the whole issue at once. Cooperation may not always be good. This is absolutely crucial for understanding and acting on climate change because frameworks and precise movements are necessary, in a field where one wrong move could make things even worse.

Additionally, we do not fully know why fossil fuels were left out of the COP30 talks. It is crucial to understand the accountability system present in especially UN talks, as the largest conglomeration of states globally, and what external players have a role (financially or otherwise) in shifting the climate narrative. Otherwise, the people pushing for climate action are pushing a Sisyphean boulder which is just pointless when they could about-face in another direction, knowing that other people are actively working against their goals.

Works Cited

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